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ABSTRACT

Studies have indicated that pregnancy is only one of the factors that cause female students to drop out of school. A study was conducted at a Chicago (Illinois) public high school to determine if there was a significant difference in the dropout rate for teens who were pregnant and those who were not. The population for the study included female students who dropped out of the school in 1993 and 1994. The total female class size was 624. Approximately 42% of these students were Hispanic American. Twenty-eight percent were African American, and 27% Caucasian. Approximately 39% were from low-income households, and 10% had limited English proficiency. The sample consisted of 173 female dropouts. Of these, 37 dropped out because of pregnancy and 136 dropped out for other reasons. Results indicated that there is no significant difference in the dropout rate for students who become pregnant and those who do not. Overall, these findings support the literature that points out the number of factors that lead to dropping out, and they emphasize the necessity for meeting the needs of adolescents in school. (Contains 1 table and 11 references.) (SLD)

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by

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The Effect of Pregnancy on the Dropout Rate of Female High School Students

Bridget Thornton-Little

Each year, more and more students tend to drop out of school. The national dropout rate hovers around 30% and is on the rise. Students who are prone to dropping out of school are referred to as "at-risk" students and pregnant adolescents are included within this group; particularly African-American adolescents. Studies indicate that pregnancy is only one of the causal factors behind adolescent females dropping out of school. Female students, therefore, will drop out of school for any number of reasons.

There is quite a bit of research on teenage pregnancy and how it relates to the dropout rate. In addition, there are studies which examine the need for school systems to meet the growing needs of pregnant adolescents, by providing them with the necessary services that will enable them to remain in or return to school, and eventually graduate. Services of this type are particularly needed in the metropolitan areas where the dropout rate for pregnant teens is extremely high. Otherwise, these teens will never successfully complete their education and will eventually come to depend on public assistance for survival.

For those school systems which have developed programs for pregnant teens and have provided the needed services where appropriate, some progress has been made to keep pregnant teens in school. The ultimate goal, however, is to provide comprehensive services that will encourage teens to delay childbearing until adulthood.

During the 1940's, the majority of dropouts were sixteen years old and dropped out from the ninth and tenth grades. Over the years (and even today) there has been a growing national concern for education, including interests in mathematics and science, "back-to-basics" and competency testing. Nevertheless, there has not been a significant change in the nation's dropout rate. Currently the national dropout rate, on the average, hovers at about 30%. Students who are prone to dropping out are those referred to as "at-risk." This group includes students who have: (1) minority/racial/ethnic group identity; (2) poverty in households; (3) a

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Single-parent family; and (4) a poorly educated parent. These are also the characteristics that place young females at risk for early pregnancy. These females tend to drop out of school to have their babies.

A dropout is defined as one who completely withdraws from school before graduating. To determine that a student dropped out, one can retrieve data from the student's permanent records. The student's permanent record (health folder) will also indicate whether or not the student was pregnant prior to dropping out of school.

There are researchers who believe that teenage mothers tend to come from low-income households. Their mothers or sisters were probably teenage mothers as well. Whether Caucasian, African-American, or Hispanic, teens whose families live in poverty and who have poor basic skills are at great risk of bearing children before the age of 19. As a result, these teenagers tend to drop out of school after having their babies. Studies show that the dropout rate for African-Americans is higher than that for Caucasians, but lower than that for Hispanics. Nevertheless, there are those who believe that despite the obstacles, these at-risk students have as much potential for academic success as other students. With some assistance by social service agencies and with greater attention by school staffs, most pregnant girls could become high school graduates.

There is no single answer as to why students choose to drop out instead of pursuing academic success and ultimately graduating. However, some researchers believe that a significant part of the problem of school dropouts can be attributed to what goes on in the high school setting. The dynamics of classroom interactions, the order and discipline in the school, and the treatment of students by school counselors and officials have important implications for the reduction of school dropout rates. School systems must, therefore, meet the growing needs of pregnant teens (i.e., parenting skills, child care services, counseling/discussion groups, family life education, and parental involvement) in order to ensure that they can successfully complete high school.

Clearly, there are those who feel that adequate services provided by school systems and social service agencies can meet the needs of pregnant teens and ultimately make a difference in their attitudes toward school. According to Scott-Jones (1991) there are others who

believe that teenage pregnancy is socially constructed as an enormous problem rather than the result of individual pathology or abnormality. First of all, these researchers believe that adolescence begins earlier than ever in recent history. For instance, the average age of the first menstrual period is 12.5 years. In contrast, in 19th century European populations, the average age of the first menstrual period was 17 years. Furthermore, in the past the first menstrual period was followed by a period of subfertility - a time when a young female, if she became sexually active, was less likely to become pregnant than she would be later. The same is not true for today. That period of subfertility is believed to have declined today due to high-calorie diets and sedentary life-styles. Secondly, Scott-Jones (1991) further stated that these same researchers believe that there is a bias toward pathology. Because adolescent childbearing is viewed as a social problem, other researchers tend to look for, and to be accepting of claims for negative developmental outcomes. To them, adolescent sexual behavior is viewed as a constellation of deviant or problem behaviors, such as drug abuse and delinquency. Researchers should not focus on asking, What is wrong with adolescents who become sexually active and bear children? Instead, researchers must ask, How are adolescents motivated to and able to delay sexual activity and childbearing?

Prater (1992) and other researchers described the attitudes of some teenage mothers as being uncaring. Teenage mothers, especially African-American mothers, did not perceive early pregnancy as presenting any significant disadvantages. To them, pregnancy served as an excuse for withdrawing from school. Single mothers with low educational ambitions were more than three times more likely to become pregnant again within two years of delivery than their peers who had high educational ambitions during pregnancy. The addition of another child generally brought schooling to a standstill. For these teenage mothers, pregnancy did not cause dropping out, but merely provided a convenient rationale. These young mothers simply failed to remain in school.

Williams (1992) indicated that the high school dropout rate hovers at a 30% national average, with worse rates, such as Chicago's 45%, in metropolitan areas. About 700,000 African American youth drop out of high school or become chronic truants each year (cited in Williams, 1990). The dropout rate stands at about 14% for Caucasians, 24% for African-American students and about 40% for Hispanics (cited in Dorfman, 1988).

Williams (1992) further stated that a number of predictors of school failure correlates directly with minority racial statue, including poverty, family characteristics, parent education, and language minority status. Children and youth considered "at-risk" experience high rates of remedial enrollment, grade retention, dropout, and teenage pregnancy. At present, almost 30% of the school population is estimated to be at risk of failure, and demographic projections predict a dramatic increase in this group.

The inner-city high school dropout rate has not varied significantly for two decades, and the number, rising with the population, have soared drastically. Unprepared to find or hold jobs, dependent on others for subsistence, many move from discouragement to frustration to alienation or failure (Ogletree, 1990).

Regardless of these and other findings, Schwartz (1991) made an attempt to refute current emphases on supposedly increased numbers of "students at risk." He claimed that such terminology usually includes students who drop out, who become teenage mothers, or who are illiterate. He presented data which demonstrate that all three of these "risk behaviors" are at their lowest in America's history. He suggested that the use of the "at- risk" label generates its own stigma, prejudice, segregation, and self-fulfilling validation. A focus on the risk behaviors of individuals and the need to improve risk communication is encouraged rather than the application of a new label.

According to Prater (1992), dropping out of school can be devastating for all youth, especially for African-American youth who may already be disadvantaged. On the average, African American youth and their parents have less education, lower incomes, more unemployment, and are more likely to live in poverty than white Americans (cited in Bell-Scott & McKenry, 1986; Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1991; Chilman, 1979; Glascon, 1980). There is no single answer as to why students choose alternatives to education. Family, peers, residential community, media, the individual's sense of identity, and the society at large collectively impact the intensity with which a student seeks an education (cited in Obiakor, 1991). It appears that all these factors may potentially influence one significant alternative to schooling, that of teenage pregnancy and parenting. As cited in Willis (1985), it was found that 90% of babies parented by black teenagers were born to unmarried adolescents. Unprotected sexual intercourse, not race or ethnicity, is the cause of

teenage pregnancy. However, 55% of all African-American births occur out of wedlock to young African-American mothers (cited in Bell-Scott & McKenry, 1986).

As indicated by Scott-Jones (1991), the change in age norms for childbearing has been uniform across ethnic groups. In her study of the 1985 birth records of a midwestern state, there were ethnic group differences in the proportion of first births that occurred among adolescents (cited in Scott-Jones, 1991). For African-Americans, more than one half of all first births were to adolescents, as supported above; for Hispanics, more than one third were to adolescents; for Whites, less than one fifth were to adolescents.

In 1988, Hess, Lyons, Corsino, and Wells (1989) conducted a panel study called "INVISIBLY PREGNANT" which involved in-depth interviews with 87 young women who had been enrolled in Chicago Public Schools and had become teen mothers. The results of this study revealed that nearly half (38 out of 80 respondents) of the girls were still "on track" toward graduation. Among the 42 dropouts, 17 (40.5 percent) were pursuing an alternative route toward a high school diploma or its equivalent (G.E.D.). Twenty-five students had dropped out completely. These dropouts were effectively rejecting an unsuccessful high school career for motherhood.

Hess et al. (1989) further stated that Instead of assuming that pregnant teens were automatically dropouts, the study suggested that with greater attention by school staffs, most of these girls could have become high school graduates. It appeared that most of the girls in the study did not receive adequate treatment on the part of school staff. Some girls reported that nobody even knew of their pregnancy. Others reported that school officials made little accommodation to their educational needs. And half of the girls said that no one talked to them about ways to continue in school.

In 1987, a year-long community task force study in Memphis City Public Schools determined that pregnancy was one of the primary causal factors behind adolescent female students dropping out of school. In response, according to McSparrin (1993), the school district initiated the **Adolescent Parenting Program (APP)**, a collaborative effort between the Memphis City Schools and several community agencies. The program offers students education and various support services that focus on the

area of mental health, senior citizen mentoring (foster grandparents), academics, attendance, health care, and parenting/child care. The author based the article on the second-year evaluation of one important component of the program--the Innovations in Education Incentive Project.

The APP, further examined by McSparrin (1993) is housed at the Comprehensive Pupil Services Educational Center (CPSEC). It's designed to be a comprehensive program for pregnant and parenting students enrolled in grades 7-12 in the Memphis City Schools. These students are considered to be at high risk for dropping out of school. The CPSEC conducts an incentive project for pregnant parenting teens. The general goals of the incentive program were, and still are, to increase school attendance, promote academic improvement through course completion and high school graduation, improve goal-setting abilities, and help students establish patterns of planning and producing for compensation. Overall, the studies showed that the Incentive Program component of the Adolescent Parent Program appeared to have had a positive effect, according to the author.

There are a number of programs designed to address the needs of pregnant and parenting teens. The Family Support Act of 1988 presented states with a unique opportunity to address the needs of these teens. The Pennsylvania Department of Education and Public Welfare have seized this opportunity and are leading the nation in combining their programmatic and fiscal resources to expand the state's teen parent initiative, as explained by Lawer & Cromley (1992). Systematic processes were developed to actualize and support coordination at the state and local levels, including the evolution of the Pregnant and Parenting Initiative, funding strategies, the development of effective community-school partnerships, retrieval of teen parent dropouts, and development of innovative practices to keep teen parents in school.

New York City has also seized the opportunity to provide services for pregnant and parenting teens. The program is called the Program for Pregnant and Parenting Services (PPPS). In 1993, according to Renfro (1993), the program received a federal child care and development block grant which was used to augment the child development, child care, and case management services provided to their student clientele. One of the program's augmented services is that of child care so that new

mothers can continue to attend classes. The program analysts recommend that PPPS increase efforts in two areas: (1) include the partners of its pregnant and parenting students in all program activities; and (2) develop a curriculum that encourages adolescents to delay childbearing until both the father and the mother are willing and able to make a life-long financial and emotional commitment to the child.

Parmerlee (1992) described a unique program offered in Boulder Valley, Colorado's public school district. The program was designed to help teen parents to mature to meet the challenges of parenting, enhance the school district's dropout/intervention assistance to students, expand opportunities for teen parents to participate in vocational education and acquire employment, and to expand teen parent opportunities to graduate from high school. The program is fully integrated into the traditional secondary school environment and includes a comprehensive child care component. Staff members include a nurse and an early childhood development specialist.

In addition to programs that provide services to pregnant and parenting teens, the Ounce of Prevention Fund in 1992 described two prevention programs. They are: (1) PEER POWER which is a program for girls; and (2) Awareness and Development for Adolescent Males (ADAM), a program for boys. It was noted that these programs, designed to reach students before high school age, helped young adolescents stay in school, helped them to delay sexual activity and pregnancy, and helped them to develop realistic career goals. Incentives were used to attract young teenagers and set them on a course that led to success in high school. Program components included: (1) one-to-one relationship with a caring adult; (2) peer interaction; (3) recreation; (4) discussion groups; (5) community service opportunities; (6) academic support; (7) exposure to the world of work; (8) family life education; (9) parental involvement; and (10) linkage with schools and community resources.

Literature on the effect of pregnancy on the high school dropout rate merely states that pregnancy is only one of the causal factors behind females dropping out of school. There is no single answer as to why these students, on a whole, drop out instead of pursuing academic success. To combat the problem of pregnant teens who do drop out of school, school systems must closely examine the problems in the high school setting. Literature on the number of successful programs, or services for pregnant

teens, stresses the need for real commitment from other school systems to initiate similar programs where appropriate.

Procedures

Population/Sample

The population in this study included female students who dropped out of Steinmetz High School by the end of the 1993 (1989 cohort) and the 1994 (1990 cohort) school years. This school is a Chicago Public School located in the North Chicago area. The total female class size for the 1993 and 1994 school years was 624 out of a class size of 1,241. Approximately 42% of the student body was Hispanic, 28% was African-American, 27% was Caucasian, 3% was Asian, and .3% of the student body was Native American. The students resided in the same general area of which approximately 39% were from low-income households and 10% were limited-English proficient students. The average 2-year mobility rate was 30% and the average 2-year attendance rate was reported as 80% on the 1993 and 1994 State School Report Cards.

The sample included 173 female students who were enrolled in the class of 1993 or the class of 1994 and dropped out of high school by the end of these years, as indicated by the data from permanent school records. From this, two sub-populations were identified. One sub-population included 37 girls who dropped out of school due to pregnancy and the other sub-population included 136 girls who dropped out for reasons not due to pregnancy. Thirty students from each sub-population were then selected at random.

The findings were calculated in terms of nominal data. A simple Chi Square test of significance was employed at the .05 level of confidence to determine if there was a significant difference in the dropout rate for those students who became pregnant and for those who did not become pregnant. TABLE 1 summarizes the test of significance.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a significant difference in the dropout rate for teens who were pregnant and for teens who weren't pregnant. Analysis of the data in table 1 indicate that 1

degree of freedom at the .05 level of confidence is 3.841 which is higher than the results obtained from the calculation of Chi Square in this study. A majority of the females who were included in this study provided school officials with their reasons for leaving or dropping out of school prior to doing so, but there is no absolute way of knowing that the information given was indeed accurate information.

TABLE 1

	preg.	not preg.
O=	25	15
E=	20	20
	5	5

X^2= 2.5
X^2 (table) at DF (.05)= 3.841

X^2= 2.5 < 3.841

The results of research findings in this study indicate that there is no significant difference in the dropout rate for those students who became pregnant and those who did not become pregnant. The null hypothesis is, therefore, accepted. Overall, these findings support the literature which simply points out that there are a number of causal factors which can be attributed to students dropping out of school, and pregnancy is just one of those causal factors.

The review of literature tended to indicate that pregnant teens are "at risk" for dropping out of school. However, students who have minority/racial/ethnic group identity, a poorly educated parent, one parent in the household, and who live in poverty are also "at risk" for dropping out of school. This is especially true for African-American youth and Hispanics.

The research findings in this study appear to be consistent with the findings of Williams (1992) who pointed out that a number of predictors of school failure correlates directly with minority racial status, including

poverty, family characteristics, parent education, and language minority status. These predictors describe risk factors and children and youth considered "at-risk" experience high rates of remedial enrollment, grade retention, dropout, and teenage pregnancy. Teenage pregnancy alone, however, is not the primary cause or risk factor for students dropping out of school.

There are probably a number of misconceptions about teenagers who become pregnant. Perhaps this is due to our own experiences or what we already know about caring for and raising children. The demands of parenthood along with financial responsibilities, lack of support from friends and/or family members, and the emotional commitment involved with raising a child seem to make it nearly impossible for adolescents to continue with their education. There are, however, a number of programs in certain school districts aimed at keeping pregnant teens in school.

The results of this study simply implies that pregnancy is not the only causal factor behind adolescents dropping out of school. Adolescents may drop out of school for any number of reasons.

School officials who are seriously concerned about the problems pregnant and parenting teens face should start by finding ways to accommodate their needs. This could ultimately mean the completion of high school for most of these girls.

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